

## **An Interview with Charles Metten**



**Brigham Young University  
Department Chair, Theatre and Media Arts  
1974-1979**

My name is Charles Metten. I was born in Fort Bragg, California. I received my Bachelor of Arts degree at UCLA in Theatre Arts and Film, and my PhD in Speech and Drama at the University of Iowa in Iowa City. I did a full year's work at the American Conservatory Theatre and then for two years special classes at the American Film Institute. I am proud to say I am, well, really the founder of the film program. I started it all. At least, I was the impetus behind getting the right people in the right places at the right time to begin the BYU Film Program.

You can't really understand the tremendous richness and the tremendous tradition and the tremendous history, and the tremendous struggle, and the tremendous low points and high points of the art of filmmaking without the love and acquaintance of the films of the silent period, and films of the 20s and the 30s and the 40s, and the directors and the actors, cinematographers, editors, etc. that went along with them. I think a young person who's in film today who does not have that background is lacking tremendously. If you want to talk about the beginnings of the film program, I'll tell you where I'm coming from. If you're not born directly into the line, then make yourself adopted by close study of all of that richness. This program is founded upon a real sturdy, strong basis. Not only strong, strong people in film, but strong, strong people in theatre, and scholars.

### **Frances Ford Coppola, Carl Malden and Robert Redford**

It really all started because I'm a graduate of UCLA. Frances Ford Coppola is a graduate of UCLA, and I'm a great fan of Coppola and his work, and have met Mr. Coppola in California at his winery at his ranch; and of course, I have a son who works with George Lucas at ILN at the Presidio, and Lucas and Coppola were close, and we've had lunch there. In the very beginning when I was thinking of the Film Program, and sitting in this Pardoe Theatre, remembering numerous—of course, after 37 years of teaching here at BYU—student actors playing here, being trained year after year after year, and then going to work as businessmen, dentists, doctors. There's nothing wrong with that, but their film training, so what? And I said, well, now, where are the jobs? I said, there aren't any jobs in theatre.

I tried to put it together, I guess in the early 80s. I said, "The only place that they can get jobs is working in the movies. So let's see what we can do." That's when I picked up the phone. I had heard on National Public Radio that an actor by the name of Carl Malden was teaching at a small liberal arts college in Oregon. So I said, "Well, gosh, if we can get Carl Malden here..." I knew Malden was connected with Bob Redford up at Sundance, so I just took a chance and I called the office of the Theatre Department up at the college, and I said, "I'd like to speak to Carl Malden," and they said, "Sure, we'll put you right through," and I talked to him, he was having lunch. I said, "We have a summer program up at BYU, we'd like you to come and maybe direct." Malden had already won an Academy Award for *A Streetcar Named Desire* and of course he was a dressing roommate of Marlon Brando and Jessica Tandy and the whole gang in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Malden said, "Sure, I'm free this summer, let me call my wife, and I'll get back to you." He got back to me, and sure enough, Malden came that summer, and that's when we started to talk about film.

Alright, let's go back to Frances Ford Coppola. Frances Ford Coppola comes from theatre. At UCLA he was required to take the theatre history classes, he was required to take the theatre acting classes, he was required to take the theatre directing classes; in fact, he wrote a one-act play that was produced in the directing class. Then finally, he wrote an article, about, "If I were to start a film program, this is what I would do and this is what I would require." This is before he brought on a young kid by the name of George Lucas as an assistant. Coppola said in his article: number one, if you're going to go into film, get a strong theatre background. Get acting, get directing, get theatre history. Get dramatic literature, and get dramatic theory and criticism. Coppola's saying this, and I said, why not? I bounced this off of Carl Malden, and he said, "Let's go up and talk to Bob Redford." And Redford's a theatre person too. In fact, his new book is

coming out, and he talks all about his theatre career. There was also on the Board of Directors of the Sundance Institute not only Carl Malden, but Jessica Tandy, Hume Cronyn, etc.

So I went up there, and I was acting. I acted eight years up at the Sundance Theatre that Redford had built, so I knew everyone up there. And of course I knew Sterling Van Wagenen, a cousin of Lola Van Wagenen, the wife (then) of Robert Redford. So I bounced this off of Redford, this Coppola article and he was ecstatic. Terrific, of course. That's exactly what he does now at the Sundance Institute. You know that they bring in playwrights when they talk about editing. When they talk about cinematography, they say, "Well, let's name a few films you've seen, the classic films. In your screenplay, what are you trying to copy here in terms of *Death of a Salesman*, or *All My Sons*?"

It was Coppola who said the emphasis was on text. Text upon the written word, upon the screenplay first and foremost, and then you go from there. Once you started getting Malden, then the next visitor was who? Sterling Van Wagenen and I worked on who else we could bring to BYU, "Who's a director that we can get that we all like and we love his films? Ah, good, King Vidor!" Martin Ritt was another one.

So we got King Vidor to come. *Ruby Gentry*, *The Crowd*, but also Jennifer Jones and Gregory Peck in *A Duel in the Sun*! King Vidor came and we bounced him on his theatre thing, his silent experience, and his love of the script.

## **Frank Capra**

The next one—the big one—was Frank Capra. Sterling taught the Introduction to Film as a night class and I taught Introduction to Film; that kept the Department of Theatre alive with three or four thousand students a year taking that class, and we said, "Let's get Capra here, and we'll run a week of Capra's films, morning, noon, and night." It was the biggest thing. We had crowds when Capra came, and we showed films over in the business building, we showed films over in this building, we showed films in the Wilkinson Center, we couldn't contain it, we showed films in this theater. The last film of Capra's that we showed was *It's a Wonderful Life*, which he said was his favorite film.

## **Jimmy Stewart**

Jim D'Arc over in the library, along with Sterling, had already gotten the Cecil B. DeMille collection, and he was working to get the Jimmy Stewart collection. Jimmy Stewart was a big star, and the favorite actor of Frank Capra, and we had just seen *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *It's a Wonderful Life*.

We said, "Would you think it's possible that we could get Jimmy Stewart?" To show the Administration and to show the Communications Department, where film was housed at the time, that there's more to filmmaking than what we think. Stewart agreed, and we got the experience of a lifetime. He hadn't signed the contract yet for his papers when he flew out here with Jim D'Arc. We put the day together; we showed several of his films. You know, he's a retired General of the United States Air Force. When the day was closing and we were coming out of the library, and I don't know if the BYU tradition is still here, but it's a wonderful thing that BYU did in those days, the ROTC doing the raising and lowering of the American flag while they played the *Star Spangled Banner*. We were coming out of the library, myself and a few other students and Mr. Stewart; at that time, it wasn't the fancy library, it hadn't been rebuilt then, it was just the Harold B. Lee library, and it was facing the X Building, as you called it, with the statue of Brigham Young, and the flagpole. The *Star Spangled Banner* started and the flag lowered. Stewart snapped to attention and he saluted. He said, "Does this happen all the time here?" And I said, "Yes, Mr. Stewart, this is a tradition, morning and evening." He said, "Well, I've never experienced this before on a college campus; where's the contract?" He signed the contract, and we have the Stewart papers now in the library.

## **BYU Film Program**

Then I attempted to go to Brent, who was Chair of the Communications Department, and talk about, “How do we get film away from [communications]?” They wanted to get rid of it. It was costing them too much. They wanted to spend more in terms of communication theory. I also had a real, real friend in Dr. Lael Woodbury, who was Dean of the college, and I also had tremendous support by current apostle, Dallin Oaks, who was President of the University at the time. I said to Brent Peterson, the Chair, “Is there any possibility that we could get the film courses that you have, and move it over from Communications into the Theatre department?” And then he said, “Let’s explore it.”

I took that cue and I then invited Arthur Knight, Dean of the Film Program at USC. He had tremendous weight and power in the academic world of film. We made arrangements for Dr. Knight to come to campus. One of the first places he visited, of course, was the then BYU Motion Pictures Studio, at that time. We walked through it, and he turned to me, and he said, “Well, Chuck Metten, where are the students?” Embarrassed, I said, “I’m sorry, sir, but they’re not allowed out here.” It was a closed shop. He made a note. We continued, we had lunch, and then right after lunch, he said, “I need to talk to your president.” And I said, “Okay, fine.” And fortunately, Dallin Oaks was always open to phone calls and important visitors. So after lunch he invited us up. And Art, on no uncertain terms, just ripped Oaks downside and up, “You have this masterful studio out there, and the students aren’t allowed? What are you thinking? It’s a film program, and you need to open that film studio out there and let the students work and learn besides the professionals who are making films!”

Folks said, “Alright, that’s important, put together a program.” And that’s when I went with Brent and Lael.

With Brent, we put together a sample program of what the film program should be: the theatre courses, the film courses, the production side *and* the theory and criticism side. Side by side: the screenwriting and the dramatic literature. We put that together and it went to Lael Woodbury first. Lael approved it, then we took it to President Oaks, and of course Oaks introduced it to President Gordon B. Hinckley.

There were oppositions, of course, some believe film is a sinful art form. Young people get involved, and then they get involved in sex, and then they get involved in bad language etc. People say that’s why we should *not* have a theatre program at BYU. Complete opposite of what Brigham Young and Joseph Smith said about the theatre, “Let’s have a theatre program, it will entertain and it will teach.” It was not the temple that was first built in Salt Lake City, but it was the Theatre. Brigham Young required his family of maybe ten daughters to go to the Salt Lake Theatre and witness the plays of Shakespeare; the great moral lessons of the plays of Shakespeare.

I just went ahead, but I had Lael and I had Dallin Oaks, because they understood it. And when we got President Hinckley behind us, also in the council to President Benson, a learned man and a writer. It all worked out because they approved it. It was approved by the Board of Trustees and then here at the university. And film was now in Theatre.

It was President Kimball who said that the motion picture is one of the great moral teachers of the world. And of course, he said, “We need to have it. We don’t need to have the films made by students, but we need to have the students who become filmmakers with the proper attitude and the proper training, and the proper philosophy of life, and mainly the spiritual side of life.”

## **Theatre and Film Department**

So we’re all set now with President Gordon B. Hinckley supporting us, and we now have it in the department. So, who’s going to be Chair of the department? We hired a young man who I had done several films with as an actor, Brian Sullivan, who was the DP, the Director of Photography. Brian was interested in chairing the department. So was another man, Keith Merrill, Academy Award winner for *The Great American Cowboy*. We interviewed Keith, and he

wouldn't work out too well at all, but Brian would. Brian accepted it and we had a Chair. We had a faculty member. We also had the professionals out at the studio saying, "Well, can I just fill in part-time and teach editing? And I'll teach lighting, and I'll teach sound, and we'll work out a financial deal," which we did. So we had adjunct faculty now.

That's how it all began. Then we got more budget. The film was underway, and the students kept coming, and that meant more budget, and so we could hire more faculty. We put the word out that we needed a faculty of film acting and film directing. That's when we went through dozens and dozens—we got hundreds of applications—and we ended up hiring a Polish fellow from World War II by the name of Tad Danielewski, who growing up in his Polish father's house during WWII, they only had turnips to eat. Tad's story. Tad, in his own way, established the discipline of the act. He was from theatre as well. When he joined the faculty, he had some interesting things, and he said that we have to have screenplays now, and he brought in writers. He started producing the short screenplays and the screenplays got longer, and pretty soon there was one that they wanted to film. It did cause us trouble, and we could not produce more films on the BYU campus, because of insurance problems. Well, we did overcome that. Then Tad left us, too bad, and theatre kind of took a back seat, because we were now getting film students more and more than theatre students. And film students were getting hired, and film students were getting jobs, which was the desire from the very beginning.

### **Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt***

I was a sixteen-year-old kid in Santa Rosa, California and *Shadow of a Doubt* is Alfred Hitchcock's favorite film. The original screenplay was written by Thornton Wilder, the writer of *Our Town*. Then it was rewritten and it became the script that Hitchcock wanted, after his wife did some refining of the script. They came to Santa Rosa, California where it was all filmed, and they needed extras. Word went out on the Santa Rosa Press Democrat Newspaper, "\$5.00 a day for extras." So I signed up as fast as I could. The truth of it all is I was really brought up by the movies, way back then. The movie started to shoot, and I was an extra, and there were scenes that I was in, and I'm still in. I was very skillful at getting up front as close to the camera as I could, but the big thing was to be there close to Hitchcock and to see what he did, how he did it, in working with Theresa Wright and MacDonald Carey and Joseph Cotton and Patricia Collins. It was a real, real, real experience for me that I'll never forget.

### **Gerald R. Molen**

Finally, I met a man who eventually would win an Academy Award with Steven Spielberg and Branko Lustig for a film called *Schindler's List*. His name was—and I say it proudly, and with great love and affection—Gerald R. Molen. We invited Gerry to come and be a special lecturer to our students and help in making contacts in the film business for our students, which Gerry did. There was a period there where our students would go down, and we had at least a dozen working at Amblin. There was my great experience of meeting Steven Spielberg at the Amblin studio, visiting his office and seeing the original red ruby slippers that Dorothy wore [in *The Wizard of Oz*], and seeing the original of the five rosebud sleds [from *Citizen Kane*], there were only three left that were not burned in the shoot of the scene, but they were owned by Steven Spielberg hanging over his fireplace.

At Amblin, and Amblin still exists, there was a special showing that Steven Spielberg called, before the film *Schindler's List* was released. He wanted the entire crew, and all of the actors and the extras, to come to Amblin, in the theatre, which was in the basement and seats about four hundred, to come and see the special showing of *Schindler's List*. As we walked in and we walked by, at the popcorn stand, who was passing out popcorn and serving candy but Steven Spielberg and Gerry Molen and Branko, the producers.

Gerry Molen was the most important part of our film program, because the kids could graduate, and if they didn't go into teaching or into the academic world of film, they could go into

the world of film commercially, and they did. Many of them are still working with it. My own son, Joseph, is working now at ILM and he has been there for 17 years. Well, he was introduced to George Lucas, who was hiring at ILM when they were still in San Rafael, before they moved to the Presidio. Now Joseph invites students down to see ILM. So the program is amazing. What they're doing now with the commercial film: students working, not as just gophers playacting at working, but working with the cameraman, working with sound people, working with catering people, working with hair and makeup people, knowing what the film business is really all about.

That's how it really all began, and it's still going strong. I think that it's kind of taken over in terms of the number of students in the program compared to the number of theatre students, because the film students say, "Well, there's a possibility that I could get a job, and make my career in this business, and do great and wonderful things and still be a member of the church."